

*The Diving Pool*  
by Yoko Ogawa

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## 1. Summary

Aya, the teenage protagonist and narrator of *The Diving Pool*, lives in the Light House, a Christian orphanage run by her parents. She is the only child living there who is not an orphan, a fact that she believes “has disfigured [her] family” (11). This, in turn, creates a great deal of resentment on Aya’s part. Simply looking at a family photo album upsets her because she is never alone with her parents in any of the photographs. All, to her, look like school class photos, and she feels lost among the orphans. She longs for a “normal” family. Yet her resentment towards her parents does not seem to be the normal teenage variety. For instance, she describes her mother’s fat lips as being, “like two maggots that never stopped wriggling, and I found myself wanting to squash them between my fingers” (18).

The story centers on her infatuation or obsession with Jun, a teenage boy who, for years, has grown up with her as a brother in the orphanage. Unlike most of the other children, Jun has not been adopted by another family. Jun attends the same high school as Aya and is a member of the diving team. Each day, Aya surreptitiously observes Jun in the diving pool at his practices. Her descriptions of his dives and of his body make it clear that she feels a strong sexual attraction to Jun despite his familial relationship to her.

As we learn of this obsession, we also follow Aya’s increasing cruelty to Rie, a toddler at the orphanage. Aya seems to take out all her frustration and anger on innocent Rie, and the pleasure she takes in hurting Rie is quite disturbing. When others are out of the house, she first hides from Rie in order to hear her distraught sobs when she finds herself alone. Then, after briefly holding her and seeming to offer her comfort, she torments Rie by placing her inside an urn. Aya says, “I wanted to savour every one of Rie’s tears, to run my tongue over the damp, festering, vulnerable places in her heart and open the wounds even wider” (26). Things escalate when Aya feed Rie a rotten cream puff, and Rie becomes so ill that she has to be hospitalized.

This episode leads to the central turning point of the story. Jun now approaches Aya after practice at the diving pool and lets her know that he has been aware of her watching him. In addition, he knows what she has been doing to Rie. For Aya, this is a seismic shift in their relationship. He says, “I was always watching you” (52). In her mind, she has been the watcher, not the watched. The ambiguous ending leaves us uncertain about what will follow.

## 2. Literary/Historical Context

Born in 1962, Yoko Ogawa, who, since 1988, has written more than twenty books, both fiction and nonfiction, has won many of Japan’s top literary prizes, including the Akutagawa Award for “Pregnancy Diary” and the Yomiuri Prize for *The Housekeeper and the Professor* (Weeks). *The Diving Pool*, a collection of three novellas, was first published in Japan in 1990; however, it was not translated into English and published in the United States until 2008 (“Yoko Ogawa”), when it received the Shirley Jackson award (“2008 Shirley Jackson Award Winners”).

Ogawa often challenges conventional expectations in her writing, particularly expectations for women. In *The Other Women's Lib: Gender and Body in Japanese Women's Fiction*, Julia C. Bullock, professor of Japanese at Emory University, explains that, going back to “the early Meiji-era Popular Rights Movement feminists in the 1870s to the members of the Seito group in the 1910s,” Japanese women had contributed “to the negotiation of gendered discourses” (9). Particularly beginning with Japanese women entering the literary scene in the 1960s, many “seemed to share a profound sense of unease regarding what it meant to be a woman in Japanese society. This seemed to have much to do with the fact that during the 1960s, ... Japanese society was experiencing a resurgence of the prewar ‘good wife and wise mother’ ideology [ryosai kenbo]- a stereotype of femininity that many of these women resisted. These writers defied models of normative femininity through their literature, crafting female protagonists who were unapologetically bad wives and even worse mothers: frequently wanton, excessive, or selfish and brazenly cynical with regard to ‘traditional’ conceptions of love, marriage, and motherhood-when they did not opt out of this system entirely” (2). These “writers challenged ‘commonsense’ assumptions of motherhood as woman’s ‘natural’ role and attacked binary models of gender...” (5). They “wrote about incest, partner swapping, abortion, infanticide, murder, rape ... and a host of other topics that violated assumptions of feminine passivity, sexual innocence, maternal instinct, and marital bliss” (13). Ogawa, in some of her work, including *The Diving Pool*, continues this tradition. Her work fits Professor Andra Alvis’s description of psychological realism as social critique, which thrived during the Showa period of 1926-1989. In keeping with that, Ogawa strongly resists idealization, that is, conforming to social/cultural ideals such as the virtuous stereotypes of the literature of the Edo period, as she creates her characters (Alvis). In “Kimono Rebellions,” Susan Chira asserts, “Japanese women grow up in a society that rigidly defines, and usually limits, their roles to that of wives and mothers. Most popular portrayals of women stick to a few, familiar portraits and themes: serene, smiling women always seem to be wearing aprons and brandishing feather dusters, or they stoically endure suffering, protecting and inspiring their families.” Ogawa undercuts these idealizations.

Others also link her writing to traditions of several male Japanese writers. According to Stephen Snyder, translator of several of Ogawa’s works and Professor of Japanese at Middlebury College, “the bizarre-lurking-in-the-mundane aspect of Ogawa's writing has precedent in Japanese literature, harkening back to the literature of the Edo period, which is in turn indebted to Chinese ghost stories. In the more recent past, it echoes Murakami, whose trimmed prose style and sense of fantasy Ogawa says were a major influence on her” (Woerner). He has also said that Ogawa, “uses the same relatively brief structures Haruki developed in response to his reading and translation of American writers such as Ray Carver. Murakami pared down literary Japanese and rebuilt it, and Ogawa is one of many writers who developed her style in part under his influence. I think her style has older roots as well, however. While Murakami was actively negating what he found counterproductive in traditional literary Japanese, Ogawa seems to be comfortable looking further back. Her work owes something to the restraint and subdued sensualism of the late Kawabata” (Snyder).

Ogawa herself has described some European and American influences, “I read *The Diary of Anne Frank* when I was fourteen and realized that writing was a way for human beings to free themselves. My own writing career began when I started to keep a diary. I tried to record my experiences as faithfully and accurately as possible, but I gradually realized that storytelling begins in the very act of putting memories into words. Eventually, bit by bit, I began creating fiction out of the notes I had taken in my diary. In 1988, I won a new writers prize given by the literary magazine *Kaien*.... My work has been influenced by Paul Auster, Steven Millhauser, and John Irving. When I read Paul Auster’s work, I sense that his novels aren’t just products of pure imagination, but concern things that already exist in the real world. A writer is someone who happens to discover something that already exists in the world but that no one has noticed, and then puts that into words. This was an utterly new concept to me, one I learned from Auster’s work. I’m always overwhelmed by Steven Millhauser’s acute vision of reality. His work communicates the sense that reality is not a question of abstractions or theories but, rather, exists as the sum of various modest, concrete details. I’ve learned a lot from his work about where a writer should focus her attention. In John Irving’s work, I am particularly attracted to the way that he tends to push a tragic situation to the extreme point at which it becomes humorous. That is, he shows us that stories of misshapen, pathetic, laughable human beings are not cause for despair but carry within them the possibility of some sort of salvation” (“Yoko Ogawa”).

### ***3. Discussion Questions and Answers***

#### Literal Questions:

From what point of view is the story told?

It is told from the first-person point of view.

Who is the narrator?

Aya, a teenage girl, narrates the story.

Where does Aya live and with whom?

Aya lives in an orphanage called the Light House with her biological parents and a number of orphans.

What does Aya like to do each day after school?

Aya goes to watch Jun practice his diving at the pool.

What is Aya’s relationship to Jun and to Rie?

They are not biological siblings but are raised with her like a brother and sister.

What does Aya do to Rie?

On more than one occasion, Aya torments Rie, shutting her in an urn and feeding her a rotten cream puff.

What does Jun reveal at the end of the story?

Jun reveals that he has been watching Aya and knows what she has been doing to Rie.

Interpretive Questions:

1.) How would you describe the narrator, the narration itself, the tone, voice, and stance? What was your reaction to this? How did you feel about the narrator? Why?

The manner in which *The Diving Pool* is told is part of what makes the story so jarring. I'm sure most readers find what Aya does to Rie to be disturbing and repellant, but the detached, matter-of-fact approach of the narrator is equally disturbing. Aya is quite open about both her cruelty and a variety of feelings that many would consider inappropriate or taboo, such as her sexual attraction to Jun and her hateful attitude toward her parents and the other children in the orphanage. She is so blunt about all of this and seems to feel no real sense of guilt or remorse. Seeing all this through her eyes puts us in very interesting positions as readers and makes us examine not only what the narrator says and does but also what her own view of all that is.

2.) How would you describe the mood?

There is an eerie quality to the story, with strong undercurrents of isolation, loneliness, and inability to form real connections, as well as anger and resentment. It feels as if there is much under the surface seething and simmering, just barely concealed at times and bursting through the surface at others.

3.) Describe Aya's family. What is its "arrangement"? How would you characterize the relationships? Is there anything "unnatural" in its arrangement? What seems strange, unsettling, or out of place? How does Aya view her family and its "arrangement"?

While Aya grows up living with both of her parents, her family configuration is certainly not that of a typical Japanese family. Along with a group of orphans, Aya lives with her biological parents in a Christian orphanage that they run. Most children are adopted and leave the orphanage at some point.

Aya sees the family arrangement as disfigured. "My mother and father are leaders of a church, a place they say mediates between the faithful and their god. They also run the Light House, which is an orphanage where I am the only child who is not an orphan, a fact that has disfigured my family" (11). To her, it is unnatural because of the orphans. She believes that she has never truly had a family or home, "...I can never hear the words 'family' and 'home' without feeling that they sound strange, never simply hear them and let them go. When I stop to examine them, though, the words seem hollow, seem to rattle at my feet like empty cans" (10-11). For her, the "family" photo album embodies all that seems to be "wrong" with her family, and Aya says that, "Occasionally, perhaps to stir up this feeling that haunts me, I open one of the photo albums that lines the bottom shelf of the bookcase in the playroom" (11). What she sees makes her resentful towards both the other children and her parents. "The photos were all taken at Light House events-picnics under the cherry blossoms, clam digging at low tide, barbecues, gathering ginkgo nuts-

and everyone is full of orphans. As in pictures from a class field trip, the faces are lined up one next to the other. And there I am, lost among them. If it were really a field trip, it would end; but these orphans came home with me to the Light House. More often than not, my mother and father stand smiling behind the children....I flip sadly through an album, studying the photos....none records my weight or length at birth... or a picture of my parents and me, I slam it closed" (11-12). This leads to a strange sort of envy on her part: "Sometimes I have thought it might be better if I were an orphan, too. If I could have one of the tragic histories do common at the Light House... then I would have been a proper orphan. Then, like all the other children, I might have imagined that the nice couple who ran the Light House were my real parents, or pretended to be sweet and innocent in the hope of being adopted. Somehow, that would have made my life much simpler" (12). Aya longs for what she considers normalcy, "From the time of the incident with the fig tree, I wanted only one thing: to be part of a normal, quiet family" (12).

To the readers, her feelings for Jun and her abuse of Rie are what seem to be unnatural or disfigured. Her cruelty towards the younger children, especially Rie and Reiko, shows not only a lack of love for family members but also a refusal even to accept them as such. Rather than protect the vulnerable, Aya victimizes them and acts in a manner that is the opposite of what we might expect from an older sibling. In addition, she has a strong sexual attraction to Jun even though they have been raised as siblings from a very young age. Her scorn and even hatred for her parents are palpable. Aya seems to subvert all of the expectations of a Confucian family.

There is a real beauty to some of Aya's descriptions, especially her descriptions of Jun's diving. That contrasts markedly with the ugliness of her actions and some of her other thoughts and descriptions, such as those of her mother's fat lips, "like two maggots that never stopped wriggling, and I found myself wanting to squash them between my fingers" (18). While Aya says she is "the only child who is not an orphan, a fact that has disfigured my family" (11), readers need to question whether that is truly the root of the problem. What has caused her "disfigurement"? Her parents seem to be compassionate people, yet she seems to have no ability to feel empathy. Why? Is she born this way? Were they actually emotionally neglectful of her in some way in an attempt to treat all of the children in the orphanage equally, or is there simply something evil in her? Aya does say of Rie, "I wanted to pet her, to spoil her, but I didn't know how to do it" (37). We're left with no definitive answer to these questions. Of the Light House and church, she says, "from the outside it is impossible to grasp their layout. Inside, they are more confusing still..." (16). That's part of the horror here. Outwardly, she seems to appear so normal to others.

4.) How does Aya feel about Jun? Why? What is he like, and how is Jun different from the other orphans?

Jun seems to be the only member of the family about whom Aya cares. She says: "The children at the Light House loved Jun, perhaps because he was extraordinarily good to them. They loved him just as I loved him" (15-16); however, her feelings for him are obsessive and clearly sexual rather than the ordinary love of a sister. The character for

Jun's name means "pure", and that is what he represents to Aya. Throughout the story, Jun is kind, compassionate, responsible, mature, and helpful. When Aya describes her desire to squash her mother's lips, which she compares to maggots, she wonders how she feels nothing but the cruelest disgust, while Jun at least appears to be interested and kind when her mother talks at meals (18-19). Jun "would soak up all the things that set [Aya's] nerves on edge... It seemed strange that he could be so good when life had treated him so badly.... I prayed desperately to be bathed in his kindness" (19). In addition, Jun, unlike most or all of the other orphans, has never been adopted and is still at the orphanage as a teenager. He is the first orphan to reach high school and still live at the Light House (21).

Unbeknownst to Jun, or so Aya believes, she watches him daily at his diving practices, which gives her tremendous pleasure. "Because his body was so important to me, I lived in fear that he would injure it.... it aroused in me a pleasant feeling that usually lay dormant" (15). When Jun disappears into locker room or when she listens for him coming home, "at such times I feel my desire for a family evaporate like the mist. I grope after it, though I know it's pointless. There are so many useless things in this world, but for me, the most useless of all is the Light House" (12-13).

5.) Think about the novella and the work that you did in the Haiku/Renku activity. What images stand out for you? Why? How does Ogawa use images to develop themes? Do you find any beauty in the story?

Answers to this will vary, but three major image groupings that merit close scrutiny are those connected to diving, food, and light. See the following questions for a more in-depth consideration of these types of imagery.

6.) What role does diving play in the story? How are diving and the diving pool used figuratively in the story? What is it that draws Aya to Jun's diving?

On the one hand, the diving pool is connected to the concept of purity, which is not surprising since it is associated here with Jun, whose name means purity. Aya describes the divers as being enveloped within the "purity of the pool" (5). In the scene at the Light House where Jun is washing his bathing suits, Aya says, "I loved the look of his fingers moving so vigorously. When I was with him, I found myself wondering how he could be so pure and innocent.... Jun suspended in midair...was the most exquisite embodiment of him, as if all his good words and deeds were wrapped around his beautiful body and left to fall free through the air" (30).

There is also imagery that links the pool to a womb, with connotations of motherhood and rebirth. Aya wonders, "Does Jun let his body float free at the bottom of the pool, like a fetus in its mother's womb? How I'd love to watch him to my heart's content as he drifts there, utterly free" (5). Aya seems to crave this freedom and purity.

When Aya prompts Jun to recall a much earlier experience they shared as children at the orphanage, she uses the act of diving as metaphor for their experiences one snowy

morning, a time when diving and their relationship were still innocent. We see that, even then, Jun was always behind her watching her. There, he encouraged her, despite her fear, to “dive in,” assuring her that it would be safe (33). “The light, too, seemed to have collected on us; everything else was pitch black. We inhabited some separate, extraordinary moment in time.... I felt like a weepy child longing to be enfolded in his arms...afraid that unless I spoke I would be crushed by desire.... As I stood with my hands submerged in the water, feeling Jun next to me, I had a deep sense of peace.... I thought back to a time when we were younger and could play together innocently, a time when Jun’s body held no particular significance for me” (31-32). Aya urges Jun to remember the day when snow had blown into the hallway because, “It would be a shame to forget something so beautiful” (32). Initially, she had felt like she was the only one awake in the world, but then Aya realized that Jun had been standing behind her all along (33).

On the other hand, much of the imagery is also of a sexual nature that seems in marked contrast to the notion of purity, given the sibling relationship between Aya and Jun. She watches his diving compulsively, “I was here yesterday and the day before, and three months ago as well. I’m not thinking about anything or waiting for something; in fact, I don’t seem to have any reason to be here at all. I just sit and look at Jun’s wet body” (5). Yet, as Aya notes, “We’ve lived under the same roof for more than ten years, and we go to the same high school...” (5). Aya feels an extremely strong sexual attraction to Jun and takes real pleasure in the physical beauty of his dives and of his body, “it’s when we’re at the pool that I feel closest to Jun-when he’s diving, his body nearly defenseless in only a swimsuit...I couldn’t reach him from here even if I tried. Yet this is a special place, my personal watchtower, I alone can see him, and he comes straight to me” (6) and “Every muscle of his body is tensed, as if he were holding his breath. The line of muscle from his ankle to his thigh has the cold elegance of a bronze statue. Sometimes I wish I could describe how wonderful I feel in those few seconds from the time he spreads his arms above his head, as if trying to grab hold of something, to the instant he vanishes into the water. But I can never find the right words. Perhaps it’s because he’s falling through time, to a place where words can never reach....I never sit here hoping for a good dive, and I am never disappointed by a bad one. Jun’s graceful body cuts through these childish emotions to reach the deepest place inside me.... This underwater pivot is even more beautiful than the dive itself: the ankles and hands slice through the water majestically, and the body is completely enclosed in the purity of the pool” (4-5). There is a creepy element to her comments that makes the reader wonder about her reliability as a narrator. How firm, the reader wonders after a comment like the one about her personal watchtower and being the only one who can see Jun, is her grasp on reality? As Aya watches Jun dive into the pool, she describes herself as feeling as though he is diving towards her and into her, internally “caressing” her (44). During a conversation with Jun, Aya privately wishes that she could tell him his diving “touches the deepest part of [her]” (49).

Ironically, despite all this, she associates watching his diving with purification for herself. This becomes particularly noticeable after she begins to torment Rie. She believes that coming to the pool after her incidents with Rie will purify her. As we will see later, the



fact that he knows what she did to Rie will remove this opportunity for her to find any further comfort in Jun, or the diving pool, or the metaphorical pool within her, “clouded as it was with a little girl’s tears” (52). The night that she helps Jun wash his bathing suits seems to be another piece of this quest for purification. “I doubted we would ever have a quiet chat about the night we washed out his swimsuits. One after the other, the children at the Light House all went away, leaving me behind. I had no idea how many of them I had watched go, standing alone at the window of my room; and there was no reason to believe that Jun wouldn’t leave like the rest. One day he would go....And that was why I wanted to remember the happiness we’d had together while we still could. I washed the suits with great care, as if by doing so I could wash away my cruelty to Rie that afternoon. I needed to pretend to be myself at a younger more innocent age when we had stood marveling at the snow in the hall. I was sure that Jun would dive into only pure water and I wanted his dive into me to be perfect; I wanted him to enter with no splash at all.... The sound of time flowing between us became the sound of the water trickling quietly from the faucet until dawn” (34-35). Again, she both fails to see the irony in this, and Jun’s being adopted at his age seems unlikely. Still Aya claims, that only alone in the stands of the diving pool does she feel “herself come to life” (35).

7.) What connotations might food typically have? What food imagery does Ogawa use? Which images stand out the most to you? Why? To what end does she use this imagery? How does the imagery counter typical connotations or expectations? What do the milk imagery and breastfeeding imagery suggest here?

Food is often associated with nourishment and comfort. Traditionally, it has frequently been connected to families or, more specifically, mothers, who are expected to offer this nourishment and comfort. Aya recounts an early memory when she and Jun were four or five years old. In this episode with the fig branch, Aya initially acts as if she is a mother breastfeeding Jun with the milky fig branch. This shifts, however, and Aya seems to suggest that this scene may have been the beginning of her cruelty. She refers to it as “this terrible feeling,” which is atypical. She usually adopts a demeanor of indifference when recounting her cruel behavior. The imagery of motherhood here is a very disturbing one, in which our images of a mother breastfeeding her baby are turned on their head. Aya associates this with revulsion and cruelty. Aya breaks a branch from a fig tree, “watching the opalescent liquid ooze from the wound” (10), and says to Jun “Time for milky!” (10) “Like a baby at the breast, he pursed his lips and made little chirping sounds, even wrapping his hands around mine as if her were clutching a bottle. The milk of the fig had a bitter, earthy smell. I felt myself suddenly overcome by a strange and horrible sensation. It might have been the fig milk of the softness of Jun’s body bringing it on, but that seemed to be the beginning-though I suppose it’s possible this terrible feeling took hold of me even earlier, before I was born” (10).

Meals in general come in for some serious criticism from Aya. According to Aya, “dinner was the strangest part of life at Light House” with the kitchen and the dining in the basement and accessed through a trap door, which leads to a comparison with Anne Frank (16). Even though “they were neither dark nor damp” because of the many windows facing the garden, she connects them with “signs of age and decay” (17). She “found breakfast in this dining room almost unbearable, amid a crowd of noisy children

and scraps of scattered food. ... I found the meals disgusting” (18). This is also the scene where Aya compares her mother’s lips to wriggling maggots that she wants to squash, even though she says that her mother is hearty and cheerful (18). Her images of decay in connection with food will soon recur.

The scene with the rotten cream puff is certainly one of the most troubling in the novella and precipitates the stories turning point and climax. Rie becomes so ill after eating a rotten cream puff that Aya gives her that she ends up in the hospital. Aya remains disturbingly detached and remote, “Though I was responsible for her condition, I found myself watching Jun instead....I’m not sure how I would have felt if Rie had died, how I would have made sense of what I’d done. Because I had no idea where the cruelty came from.... (42-43).

Stephen Snyder, translator of Ogawa’s novella, has “linked Ogawa's obsession with food and decay—rancid pastries, rooms stacked full of rotting kiwis—with the centrality of food in Japanese culture, and a fixation on hygiene and purity which may have roots in the Shinto religion. He recounted an anecdote about accompanying a Japanese author to lunch at a high-end sushi restaurant in Tokyo, a bare white room where he was treated to sushi served on a slab of cedar” so clean that it hurt to look at it. “In a culture in which the cleanliness of food is sacred, the notion of feeding an infant a rotting cream puff would not just be mean-hearted. It would be sacrilege, an unthinkable transgression” (Woerner).

#### 8.) How does Ogawa use light imagery?

One of the most significant uses of light in the story is the name of the orphanage, the Light House. Given the parents’ Christianity, the name certainly would appear to have religious connotations. The parents seem to intend to have the orphanage be a place of light and refuge, a place that shines the light and love of God. It is meant to stand in contrast to metaphorical darkness and to drive it away. “[T]he gate, standing wide open, held back by a rusted chain that seems to prevent it from ever being closed. In fact, I have never seen it closed. It’s always open, ready to welcome anyone who comes seeking God in a moment of trouble or pain. No one is ever turned away, not even me. Next to the gate is a glass-covered notice board with a neon light, and on it is posted the Thought for the Week: WHO IS MORE PRECIOUS? YOU OR YOUR BROTHER? WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF GOD, AND YOU MUST NEVER TREAT YOUR BROTHER AS A STRANGER” (7). It is this very philosophy of her parents that seems to trouble Aya so much.

At least in Aya’s eyes, the name seems to be ironic. “The darkness inside the gate seems even thicker than outside...” (8). “I can never simply come home the way other girls do. I find myself reading the Thought for the Week, passing through the gate, entering the Light House-and something always stops me, something always seems out of place” (8-9).

In reality, all is not light in the Light House, all is not as it appears. There are secrets and darkness. In the garden at the Light House, “The brilliant sunlight made the shadowy places seem fresh and clean, and the objects in them—a tricycle, a broken flowerpot, every leaf and weed—stood out vividly” (24). Later, Rie staggers toward the narrator “on unsteady little legs, crossing the boundary between bright sunlight and quiet shade” (25). There is a significant discrepancy between appearance and reality, and we are left wondering what else is not as it seems. It seems to be Ogawa who is shedding light on things often kept under wraps in darkness and obscurity.

9.) As I noted in the Literary /Historical Context section, *The Diving Pool* follows the tradition of psychological realism in Japanese literature. What idealizations does Ogawa resist in this work? What taboos does she include? Does Ogawa use psychological realism as social critique here? How does the narrator feel about what she does? What does the narrator’s view of societal norms seem to be?

According to Amber Qureshi, Executive Editor of Viking Press, “To enter [Ogawa’s] world is to visit a reality untroubled by any preconceptions of propriety, order, even narrative style. The only thing her characters have in common, with each other and with their author, is a freshness of perspective, free of societal norms, and an obstinate, tenacious yen to explore. Is this unusual for a writer born in what’s said to be a relentlessly homogeneous society that encourages uniformity at any cost? ... This is what I mean by generosity, and freedom: Ogawa enters the thoughts and hearts of her characters without fear, judgment or anticipation—she lets them speak to us on their own terms, one of the hardest things for a writer to do. And I think that she’s able to do this because underlying her writing is the purest and most penetrating kind of love. She teaches us that however atrocious our innermost thoughts are, we are worthy of love and of being loved. Her sympathy precisely and methodically destroys the lines between cruelty and tenderness, and in her forgiveness we find hope. With gentle force, Ogawa suspends all our own preconceptions to guide us into her hyper-reality, bathed in fractured light, muted sound, and ethereal, delicate, rhythmic, and horrifying imagery” (Qureshi).

Through Aya, Ogawa subverts many gender and familial expectations. Aya is cruel and abusive to a defenseless toddler for no apparent reason other than that it gives her some sort of feeling of power and sadistic pleasure. When she is alone with Reiko, another orphan who is closer to her in age, Aya, as often as possible, purposefully brings up Reiko’s parents who are both in a mental hospital, even though she knows that Reiko does not like to talk about her parents (21-22). Moreover, she is hateful towards and disrespectful of her own parents. Aya’s feeding Rie the rotten cream puff (which is discussed above) is one of the most notable examples of Aya’s contempt for social norms and expectations. Having a toddler as the target of Aya’s cruelty amplifies this. Even before the cream puff episode, we see Aya treat Rie in a way that would be completely unacceptable socially. Once again, as in the fig tree episode, Aya undercuts traditional notions of females’ nurturing, caring and feelings of a maternal nature. When a child is left in her care, she torments her. Interestingly, this occurs in the same spot where the fig tree had been located (24). Light imagery also comes into play here as “The brilliant

sunlight made the shadowy places seem fresh and clean...” (24). It’s a perfect trifecta, as the food imagery emerges next. Aya says of Rie, “The tiny legs protruding from the elastic hems of her pants looked like pats of smooth, white butter. Whether they are dark and blotchy, covered in a rash, or rippling with rings of fat, I am always fascinated by a baby’s thighs. There is something almost erotic about their defenselessness...” (24-25). Rie’s coming over repeatedly to have her hand cleaned puts Aya in a “cruel mood”; she says, “However, I didn’t find the feeling particularly unpleasant; in fact, there was something agreeable about it. This cruel impulse had been coming over me quite often then” (25). Hiding from Rie, she listens to her violent sobs. Aya then says, “I wanted to savor every one of Rie’s tears, to run my tongue over the damp, festering, vulnerable places in her heart and open the wounds even wider” (26). Consequently, she shuts her in an abandoned urn. “I wanted to hear her cry louder. I wanted to hear every kind of howl or sob she could produce.... Every day of my life I had heard someone crying at the Light House.... there had always been tears, and I had tried my best to love every one of them because I was the orphan no family wanted to adopt, the only one who could never leave the Light House. Still, Rie’s terrified tears were particularly satisfying like hands caressing me in exactly the right places- not vague, imaginary hands, but his hands, the ones I was sure would know just how to please me” (27, 28).

Also, Aya is open about her sexual desires, and she frankly expresses feelings that many would view as incestuous. Feminist theory has long explored the concept of the male gaze, which has traditionally turned women into passive objects who are looked at by men. Ogawa subverts the male gaze in much of the story- it is female Aya obsessively looking at Jun’s body. Ironically, at the end, we see that he had indeed been watching her, too. While Aya believes that her watching has gone unnoticed, Jun stuns her at the end of the story when he says, “I was always watching you” (52).

10.) What contradictions do you see in Aya? In anything else here?

Aya wants to hurt and then to pet and spoil Rie,; she wants to be pure but is cruel. She says all the other children will leave, but Jun never has and is her age. She wants both to mother/nurture/feed others and to harm. Also, Aya wants both to be mother and to be child. There is a contradiction between the beauty of her language, at times, and the horror of the events she describes. While she claims to want the light and purity she associates with Jun, she is drawn to the urn and the cream puff with their images of rot and decay. Her inner self and outer self contrast with one another.

11.) What do you make of the ending? Had you suspected that Jun knew or were you surprised? How does it shape your view of the story? Does it change your view of Jun? Why didn’t he say anything before? What do you think will happen next? Is the ending ambiguous? How do you think Jun feels about Aya? Do you think Jun will forgive Aya for what she did? Will she forgive herself? Does she think she has done something wrong? How does the narrator’s age impact the story? That is, how does it affect her behavior and our response to it? How do you feel about Aya? Do you think the author believes we all have potential for this sort of cruelty?

Students will no doubt have a variety of reactions to the ending. I find the ending to be disturbing in some ways. We return to Aya's search for purity after the horrific episode with Rie, "I returned to the pool as soon as I could. It seemed all the more precious after I'd tasted deeply of my own cruelty. The ripples reflecting on the glass roof, the smell of the water, and above all the purity of Jun's glistening body-these things had the power to wash me clean. I wanted to be as pure as Jun, even if only for a moment" (42-43). Yet, immediately after this, she tells us that she felt no remorse (43). Nevertheless, she says that her purpose there is to heal herself (45). And here, in her eyes, is that process: "As his legs traced a perfect circle in the air, like a compass falling through space, I could feel his body in mine, caressing me inside, close and warmer and more peaceful than any real embrace" (44). That last phrase is particularly telling, her belief that the relationship she imagines is far better than any real relationship. Aya does recognize that she actually has not been purified. "He would appear as he always did, fresh from his beloved practice; and I would be stained with the traces of Rie's tears and her rosy pink rash, which the pool had failed to wash away" (46). "[T]o gaze at Jun's wet body and to make Rie cry" (50), these were the only things that gave her comfort.

We see a marked difference between Jun and Aya in some key ways. After noting the uncertainty that he has observed in her, Jun says, "There's no time for that [uncertainty] when you're diving.... Maybe it's because there was something so uncertain and twisted about my birth, but when I'm up there on the board, I just want to dive as straight and clean as possible with no hesitation" (50). When Aya asks if he resents his parents, he replies, "No... How can you resent someone you don't even know?" (50). Aya, on the other hand, as we have already discussed, harbors deep resentment against her parents. While she feels she has suffered and seems to blame her parents, is there any sign that her parents actually are neglectful, abusive, or unkind? Jun, on the other hand, was abandoned and came from truly difficult circumstances. He has tremendous compassion and sympathy towards Rie and recognizes the difficulties of her life and moves to protect her at the end. This is very different from Aya, who does not seem to have endured any true hardships and who takes pleasure in being cruel to others who are vulnerable. Even when Jun finally confronts her about Rie, "There was no hint of blame or reproach in his voice..." (50). Instead, he tries to explain to Aya what Rie's life has been like, "Rie's had a hard time.... Her mother was mentally retarded, and she had Rie in a restroom" (52).

On the one hand, what does Jun mean when he says, "I was always watching you" (52)? He apparently has been watching her much as she has watched him. Why has Jun done nothing if he knew what she was doing? What will come next? We're left with ambiguity. Aya feels as if she is "falling head over heels into the empty diving well" (52). "I realized I could never ask anything of him again...He would never dive into the pool inside me, clouded as it was with the little girl's tears. The waves of regret were gentle, but I knew they would ripple on forever" (52-53). Jun's reaction is totally different. He simply says, "Let's go...Home, to the Light House" (53), yet to Aya it has never felt like home, and this "strikes her as a terrible joke" (53).

#### 4. Activities

These activities are most appropriate for juniors or seniors. While they are designed to work in conjunction with one another, teachers could choose to eliminate some of these activities, so the required time could range from three to six class periods based on what choices the teacher makes. Each activity should take about one class period.

Materials Needed: Students will need a copy of the novella *The Diving Pool* by Joy Ogawa for all activities except Activity 2, and they will need paper and a pen or pencil. For Activity 2, student groups will need a collection of flowers and leaves, a keson, a container, a ruler, and a cutting tool OR drawing paper and crayons/colored pencils OR access to a computer. Teachers will need to be able to show a video. For Activity 4, students will need examples of haiku and renku. Sources for this are listed below. For Activity 7, students will need the Universe of Obligation handout, and teachers will need to be able to show a video.

##### 1.) Reading

Have students read *The Diving Pool* for homework.

##### 2.) Ikebana, *The Diving Pool*, and Ordered/Disordered Arrangement

As I have indicated in the Literary/Historical Context section, some of Ogawa's characters challenge social norms and the expected order of relationships, particularly those related to gender expectations. In order to get students thinking about the concept of an ordered arrangement, in class introduce some basics about Ikebana, the Japanese art of floral arrangement. Read aloud pages 65-68 from *Heaven and Earth Are Flowers: Reflections on Ikebana and Buddhism*. Also, view the first or both of these YouTube videos: *How to Arrange Flowers: Ikebana Flower Arrangement!* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4POPSKkfbC>) and *Learn How to Make a Basic Ikebana Arrangement-Rising Form* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btCQC0lWUms>). Teachers might want to read *Ikebana: The Art of Arranging Flowers* by Shozo Sato in preparation for this unit.

Ask students to list what they learned about Ikebana's principles of arrangement and aesthetics. Then, working in groups of four, have them create an arrangement according to these principles. If you do not have access to flowers, containers, kesans, and cutting tools, you could ask students to draw these arrangements or to use computers to create them digitally. Next, have students create a second arrangement in which something does not conform to the principles and is askew.

Have a whole-class discussion on both the process and effects for each arrangement. When you discuss the story (see later activity), connect this to what students see about family arrangements and other elements of the social order.

##### 3.) Interacting with the Text and Oral Text Rendering

These ideas are based on techniques that I have learned from Bard's Institute for Writing and Thinking. Have students go back to the text of *The Diving Pool* and place an "I" next to at least five sections where the text drew them in because they were interested, intrigued, involved, or inspired. Also, have them place an "O" next to at least five sections that pushed them out of the text because they felt uncomfortable, uninterested, upset, disgusted, confused, angered, or alienated in some way.

After students have completed this, have them read at least some of these aloud so that they create a dialogue using only the language of the text. This should not simply be a read aloud where the order is random. Any student can begin, but, after that, the idea is for students to listen carefully to others' excerpts and to insert one of their own excerpts when they feel that it speaks to what has just preceded it. That may be because it supports what has just been read, further develops it, or contradicts it, for instance.

When the conversation they have created using only the text seems to have come to a natural conclusion, ask them to comment on what they heard. This close attention to the text will help them to notice things they might have missed on an initial reading and to think about what the text seems to be saying. This will also prepare them for the Haiku/Renku activity.

#### 4.) Haiku, Renku, and *The Diving Pool*

Ogawa's imagery is vivid, powerful, and often beautiful. Having students give careful consideration to the imagery in *The Diving Pool* will aid them in seeing how these images play a central role in developing the novella's themes. Students will get in groups of four and, using the language of the text, create a series of linked haiku or renku that actually make a statement about the story and its themes. Reconvene the whole class and have students share these poems and discuss what they capture about *The Diving Pool*.

First, explain to students what haiku and renku are. Here are definitions from the Haiku Society of America's website.

#### **HAIKU**

**Definition:** A haiku is a short poem that uses imagistic language to convey the essence of an experience of nature or the season intuitively linked to the human condition.

**Notes:** Most haiku in English consist of three unrhymed lines of seventeen or fewer syllables, with the middle line longest, though today's poets use a variety of line lengths and arrangements. In Japanese a typical haiku has seventeen "sounds" (*on*) arranged five, seven, and five. (Some translators of Japanese poetry have noted that about twelve syllables in English approximate the duration of seventeen Japanese *on*.) Traditional Japanese haiku include a "season word" (*kigo*), a word or phrase that helps identify the season of the experience recorded in the poem, and a "cutting word" (*kireji*), a sort of

spoken punctuation that marks a pause or gives emphasis to one part of the poem. In English, season words are sometimes omitted, but the original focus on experience captured in clear images continues. The most common technique is juxtaposing two images or ideas (Japanese *rensô*). Punctuation, space, a line-break, or a grammatical break may substitute for a cutting word. Most haiku have no titles, and metaphors and similes are commonly avoided.

## RENKU

**Definition:** A *renku* is a linked-verse poem in the popular *haikai* style, particularly as practiced by Bashô and later poets writing in his style.

**Notes:** In Japanese, “*renku*” is a modern equivalent for *haikai no renga*. Usually written by two or more people, a *renku*'s most important features are linking and shifting. “The best English approximation of the verse-rhythm of Japanese *renku* seems to be a poem ... beginning with a three-line stanza, followed by a two-line stanza, and alternating three- and two-line stanzas thereafter. This parallels the gentle longer/shorter/longer rhythms basic to *renku* in Japanese . . . . Typical *renku* consist of eighteen, twenty, thirty-six, or more of these alternating stanzas, though even shorter forms have been popular in recent decades. Note that the starting verse of a *renku* is what evolved into the ‘haiku’ as we know it, with its emphasis on the here and now. The remaining stanzas . . . should connect well with their preceding stanzas and provide opportunity for movement in a new direction for those following . . . . A major point of *renku* writing is to move forward, from stanza to stanza, through a great variety of time, weather, environment, activity, fauna, and flora.

Teachers can find examples of Haiku and *Renku* to use as models in *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Teach, and Appreciate Haiku* by William J. Higginson and Penny Harter, Higginson’s website *Renku Home*, the Haiku Society of America website, and Terry Ann Carter’s *Lighting the Global Lantern: A Teacher’s Guide to Writing Haiku and Other Related Literary Forms*. In her book, Carter offers the following tips about composing haiku that you can share with your students:

- “In Japanese, haiku consists of 17 morae (or on) “sound beats” written on one line. English language haiku are written on three lines or less, and are usually less than 17 syllables. These three lines are composed by juxtaposing two images together.... The moment, not the syllables, is what matters most” (3).
- “Most poets don’t use capital letters at the beginning of a line of haiku” (9).
- “Haiku do not rhyme” (9).
- “Show, don’t tell” (9).



- “The language of haiku is concrete, common, and natural. Avoid words that are judgmental such as *gorgeous* and *wonderful*. Also avoid words that are abstract:
- *love, courage, loyalty*. Haiku is written in the present tense, although there are exceptions. Some haiku have no verbs” (9).
- “Haiku depend upon the five senses” (9).
- “Haiku consist mostly ... of two images put together to create harmony, contrast, emotions, depth. One image may appear on one line, the other image may be described in the other two lines, or vice versa. There should be a pause at the end of either the first or the second line, but not both. Sometimes you might find a comma, a dash, an ellipsis 9...) separating the two parts of the haiku; however, it is not necessary to use punctuation” (9).
- “The seven most popular techniques for writing haiku are: comparison, contrast, association, mystery (yugen), narrowing the focus, the sketch, and focus on the senses” (11).

#### 5.) *The Diving Pool*’s Narrator and Perspective

The narrative voice and stance of *The Diving Pool* often prove to be jarring and disturbing to readers. It is essential that students give close consideration to the effects of the narration. In order to help students do this, have them choose a short section of the story to rewrite from Jun’s perspective. Discuss what they learned from this about the impact of the narrator and perspective.

#### 6.) Discussion Questions

Now that student have finished a variety of activities that have helped them look very closely at the text, discuss the questions listed in the Discussion Questions listed above.

#### 7.) *The Diving Pool* and Facing History’s Universe of Obligation

Before having students launch into a consideration of the fascinating ending of the novella, introduce the ideas of upstanders, bystanders, victims, and perpetrators using Facing History’s short video “Who Is an Upstander?”:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtoNUWOT8Cg>, as well as their Choosing to Participate videos: <http://www.choosingttoparticipate.org/explore/exhibit>. Next, have students fill out a Universe of Obligation chart (found on the second page of at this link: [http://www.facinghistory.org/sites/facinghistory.org/files/Universe\\_of\\_Obligation.pdf](http://www.facinghistory.org/sites/facinghistory.org/files/Universe_of_Obligation.pdf)) for themselves. Consider a time when they have played one of these roles. What have they learned from that? Then, fill out two more Universe of Obligation charts, one for

Aya and one for Jun. Compare and contrast the two. What does that help us to see? What do students make of both characters' choices?

### 5. *Connections to Other Literary Works*

1.) As an extension of the Universe of Obligation activity (above in Activities) , have students read the following two poems: “What You Do” by Maxine Kumin and “The Most Unbelievable Part” by Marjorie Agosin. Both speak to Aya’s behavior. Then, have students create a poem that creates a dialogue among the three authors using only words from the texts in order to see where they intersect and where they diverge and how they speak to each other.

2.) It would be fascinating to read Yoko Ogawa’s novel *The Housekeeper and the Professor* alongside *The Diving Pool*. Comparing and contrasting two works, particularly by the same author, would keep students from making sweeping generalization about Japanese culture based on one work. The family dynamics are quite different in these two stories, as are the tone, themes, and characters.

3.) Adam Johnson’s novel *The Orphan Master’s Son* would make an interesting pairing with *The Diving Pool*, as both works have a main character who was raised in an orphanage but was the only child there who was not an orphan. While Johnson is an American, the novel is set in North Korea.

4.) Reading “Congruent Figures” by Takahashi Takako would provide wonderful opportunities to explore the ways in which these two works use psychological realism to challenge societal expectations, particularly with regard to gender.

5.) Short stories by Haruki Murakami would allow students to explore the ways in which we see his influence in her work and the ways in which she moves in new directions.

6.) After reading Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery,” students could discuss why they believe Ogawa won the Shirley Jackson Award for *The Diving Pool*.

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